



Nāṭyaçāstra: An Indigenous Knowledge System and a Model for Modern Theatre Performances

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Abstract— Performance is the key factor of the play. In the magnus opus of the performance, the Nāṭyaçāstra, different aspects of the play are analyzed in detail. Nāṭyaçāstra is a perfect example of Indian indigenous knowledge system. Even though it is dealing with the fifth veda, i.e. Natya, such a comprehensive analysis of performance can't be seen in the entire world. Structure of the play, stage, acting, properties are explained in detail in this book. Each play can be performed in many ways and every performance is a text. Each performance interprets text in its own way and a director can raise the play to a higher realm and transcend the limitations of a text. Two approaches are there for a play text- 'textual' and 'theatrical'. Both the approaches interpret text in different ways. While 'textual' approach gives emphasis on the analysis of the play text, theatrical approach gives emphasis to the technical elements of the play. These technical elements include acting, costume, make up and stage properties. Structure of the play is also very significant. Based on the structure of the play, play text is divided into different divisions. Bharata classifies the Rasa under eight categories (Ashtarasa) and gives the corresponding Bhava which gives rise to the rasa. These are known as Sthayi bhava or pervading stable emotion. This book, Nāṭyaçāstra, provides even minute observations on the ways of enjoying 'rasa', i.e., the ways of enjoying a play. This book Nāṭyaçāstra is a great contribution of Indian indigenous knowledge system. This paper is an analysis of Nāṭyaçāstra as an indigenous knowledge system and model for modern theatre performances.



Keywords— Performance, Structure, Natya, Rasa, Bhava.

Performance is an interpretation of the play. Each play can be performed in many ways and every performance is a text. Since human imagination is boundless, a number of varied performances are possible. Each performance interprets text in its own way and a director can raise the play to a higher realm and transcend the limitations of a text. Two approaches are there for a play text- 'textual' and 'theatrical'. Both the approaches interpret text in different ways. While 'textual' approach gives emphasis on the analysis of the play text, theatrical approach gives emphasis to the technical elements of the play. These technical elements include acting, costume, make up and stage properties. There are several opinions regarding the necessity of preference on any one of these areas. But the theoreticians are of different opinions in this case. Since both these areas are important for the play, an amalgamation

of both these elements becomes very important. Tutun Mukherjee's opinion regarding the "textual" and "theatrical" approaches is worth quoting in this regard:

It is obvious that while the 'literary approach' would insist on a 'written' text and confine itself to the thematic explorations of that text (as though the theme were not a product of performance!), the 'theatrical approach' would take the theatre productions as interpretations of the drama script even though they might or might not do justice to the spirit or the possibilities of the text. For the 'literary approach,' the dramatist 'controls the meaning;' for the 'theatrical approach,' the director and the performers have the ability to 'manipulate the meaning;' and so on. The theatre and drama researcher is expected to

deal with apparently dissimilar - although intimately correlated - types of textual material: one that is produced for theatre and another that is produced in theatre. (15)

Structure of a play is very important in its performance aspects. Structure of the play determines the pace and strength of the play. A play opens up before the spectators within a short span of time. Performers and directors are the medium of this. It is not a blueprint of action, but it is a necessary mechanism to shape the perception of audience. Structural coherence or unit is not a constraint but it is a basic driver of dramatic action, character development, engaging spectators and meaning creation. Structure gives the play unity and the division of a play text depends on the nature of structure. Structure is the basis of the experience of a spectator. It is an organizing principle and a dynamic narrative force. Structure is thus a narrative engine. It selects, arranges and places events in its respective places. Vijay Tendulkar observes: "In a performing art, the structure is not seen but *felt*. One can quote any number of instances where the performance of a play or an otherwise serious film could not consistently involve the audience and make a sharp impact in spite of many good points because of a faulty structure" (50). While analyzing the structure theories of *Nāṭyaṣāstra* assume supreme importance in the analysis of scope of performance in texts. M.Hiriyanna, the genius in Indian Aesthetics remarks,

That is, the creations of art must leave a moral influence on the spectator without his knowing that he is being so influenced. Though theoretically, the theme of art may be anything which has a basis in life, this additional requirement makes it necessary to restrict the scope of the artist's choice to the higher aspects of life. Otherwise, art not only ceases to exert any moral influence; it may turn out in the end to be a means of corrupting character and degrading ideals. (172)

Ravi Chaturvedi emphasizes that even the word 'performance' is not used by Bharata in his text, "Bharatamuni has discussed this transformation in detail. Interestingly, or may be amazing for some of the theorists, he doesn't use the word 'performance' in his entire book of 36 chapters. Rather, he very frequently and definitely uses the word 'prayog' or 'the experiment' for the act of playing" (7).

Nāṭyaṣāstra is considered as the *magnum opus* on dance and drama, Bharata's *Nāṭyaṣāstra* can be viewed as a major influence on the theatricality and the structure of plays. *Nāṭyaṣāstra* is the greatest contribution of Indian aesthetics and it provides a scientific as well as structured

analysis in the construction and performance of texts. Keith observes:

The work, which we have under the title *Bhārātīya Nāṭyaṣāstra*, is extremely badly preserved in the manuscript tradition, a fact due in part to the comparatively late date of any commentary upon it. We have only a few references to an exposition of the *Nāṭyaṣāstra* by Mātrgupta, a somewhat mysterious figure with a more or less legendary connection with Kālidāsa, with whom he has even identified. (290-91)

Nāṭyaṣāstra is a perfect example of Indian indigenous knowledge system, Even though it is dealing with the fifth veda, i.e. Natya, such a comprehensive analysis of performance can't be seen in the entire world. The period in which *Nāṭyaṣāstra* is formed is still a subject of debate. Majority of the scholars hold the opinion that *Nāṭyaṣāstra* is written during the early decades of Christian era. There are also views that the author Bharata is not a single person, but a group of people. Some have the opinion that the majority of the books were written by the disciples of Bharata. This great book contains thirty-six chapters and six thousand verses. There are also many doubts that books like *Bhārātāsutrā* or *Nātāṣāstrā* had already been there before the evolution of *Nāṭyaṣāstra*. Origin of *Nātaka*, construction of *Natyamandapa*, theory of *Rasa*, hand gestures, music, and use of percussion instruments, in short, everything related to *Natya* are dealt with detail in *Nāṭyaṣāstra*. Keith observes in connection with the content of *Nāṭyaṣāstra*:

In treatise, as we have it, is elaborate, covering the whole ground connected with the drama. It deals with the architecture of the theatre, the scenery, and the dress and equipment of the actors; the religious ceremonial to be observed at every representation; the music, the dance, the movements and gestures of the actors, and their mode of delivery; the division of roles; the general characteristics of poetry; the different classes of drama, and the emotions and sentiments which form a vital element in the drama. There is confusion, complexity and repetition in the work, but that much of it is old cannot be doubted. (291)

An overall view of the contents of the chapters of *Nāṭyaṣāstra* can be given like this. First chapter deals with the origin of *Nāṭyāvedā* and *Nāṭyāprāyogā* in story form. Second chapter describes the formation of *Nāṭyāgruhā*. While third chapter explains the *Rangādevathāpoojā*, different kinds of dance forms are explained in the fourth chapter. Fifth chapter is the detailed description of *Poorvārangāvidhi* and sixth chapter analyses *Nāṇḍi* and

five types of *Dhruvageethi*. Sixth and seventh chapters are detailed discussions of *rasa* and *bhava*. Chapters till the 11th deal with the *Chaturvidhābhīnayā* like *sātvika*, *āngikā*, *vāchikā* and *āharyā*. While *Chāri* (exercise with one leg) is the topic of 11th chapter, 12th chapter analyses *Mandalams* (like *Kalasa* of Kathakali). While 13th chapter examines the changes that we intend to consider in *Gathi* (course of story), 14th chapter explains *Kakshyā* (position of character on stage) and *Lokā-nāṭya dharmi*. From 15 to 22nd chapters, *Vāchikābhīnayā* is explained. *Ahāryabhīnayā* is described in 23rd chapter and it analyses on the usage of costumes. When 24th chapter deals on common acting, 25th chapter focuses on the acting and other *Upachāras* of characters like prostitutes. Peculiarities of *āngikābhīnayā* and the qualities prescribed for viewers are expressed in 26th and 27th chapters. From 28th to 31st chapter, there are the prescriptions regarding the usage of musical instruments. While qualities of singers and music directors are analysed in 32nd chapter, usage of percussion instruments like *Mrudāngam* is explained in 33rd chapter. 34th chapter *Prakrithivichāram* deals with the difference in characteristics of hero and heroine and 35th chapter includes valuable advises regarding the selection of people to include into the theatre as characters. The last, 36th chapter, *Nāṭyavathāra* explains the ways in which *Nāṭya*, that is born in heaven, arrives earth to amuse people. *Nāṭyaçāstra* concludes with this chapter and this book can be termed as an encyclopaedia, which includes almost all aspects of *Nāṭya*.

Nāṭyaçāstra projects the view that every performance can be divided into ten forms named *Dāçarūpaka*. They are *Nāṭaka*, *Prakarāṇa*, *Bhāṇa*, *Prahasana*, *Dima*, *Vyāyoga*, *Samavakāra*, *Vīthī*, *Anka* and *Ihāmrga*. This division is based on the *Vrithibhedā* or nature of content, hero and sentiments. According to *Nāṭyaçāstra*, every play is characterised by its five stages. They are *ārambha* (beginning), *Yatnā* (hard work), *Prāptyāçā* (desire from possibility to attain the aim), *Niyathapthi* (whether they will achieve it or not, period of tension) and *Phalāgama* (attainment of result). This analysis is connected with the action of *Nayāka* and is termed as *Avasthā Panchakam*. Each act of the play is constructed on the basis of these stages with the aid of five *Arthāprakrti* like *Bīja* (germ), *Bindu* (drop), *Pathāka*, *Prakari* and *Karya* (denouement). This division is connected to the various conditions of *Vasthu* (object). When *Avasthā Panchakam* and *Artha Prakrithi* meet at the junctures, they are classified as *Sandhis*. Five *Sandhis* are termed as *Mukha*, *Pratimukha*, *Garbha*, *Vimarça* and *Nirvahaṇa*. This may be extended to ten acts

Plot must be a well-known one for *Nāṭaka*. All *Sandhis* should be in good combination in this form. Hero

should be a chivalric and famous king. *Nāṭaka* is advised to be a combination of divine characters, results of *Dharmarthakama mokshas*, *Ankavibhaga* (Act Divisions) and *Pravesaka*. The plot of *Nāṭaka* must be the story of a king filled with the mixture of happiness and sorrow and different *rasas* and *bhavas*. It must observe the *Arthaprakari* and it must develop *Bīja* without extending the plot much. One *Ankām* must explain one day's incidents in connection with *Bīja*. There is also a direction that hero or heroine must be there in each *Ankām*. There may be five to ten *Ankāms* in each *Nāṭaka*. *Pravesaka* may be utilised for indicating incidents which happen in more than a day. *Nāṭaka* may not show incidents which extends over a period of more than one year. War, loss of power and death must be indicated only through *Pravesakam*. *Adbhutha* (wonder) *rasa* must be there in *Nirvahaṇa* of each *Nāṭaka*.

In *Prakarāṇa*, the plot and the hero are determined by the poet. It is the story of Brahman, business man, minister, priest, commander of armed forces, etc. *Nayaka* should be a chivalric person. It must not be a *Divyacharita* or it must not include the comforts of a king. Common people and servants should be there in *Prakarāṇa*. Story of prostitutes can also be included in *Prakarāṇa*. If the story is family-oriented, then there may not be a prostitute. All other stipulations are like that of *Nāṭaka* in *Prakarāṇa*. *Natika* is another *Uparūpa*, which may be built by combining the elements of *Nāṭaka* and *Prakarāṇa*.

Samavakāra has the *Kadhabīja* of the conflict between *Deva* and *Asura*. Hero of *Samavakāra* must be a well-known person. There are only three *Ankāms* for *Samavakāra*. There may be three deceptions. One of that must be as per the moving of the plot, another as per the will of god and the third one must be out of vengeance. There may be three types of act of "running" enacted by the characters. One must be due to war or flood. Another may be of storm, setting fire, etc and the third one must be due to imposition of curfew in the city. There must also be three types of *Sringara* aimed at different objectives like *Dharma*, *Artha* and *Kama*. There may be twelve heroes and the story line period must be eighteen hours. All four *Sandhis* except *Vimarsanam* must be there in the play. Each *Anka* must be different from the other.

In *Dāçarūpa* form *Ihāmrga*, there may be divine and high characters, war due to a divine lady, a good plot and there must be three *Sandhis* except *Garbha* and *Vimarsana*. This *Rūpa* gives emphasis to the *rasa Sringara* and there may be reasons for lack of belief. There may be calamities, running, attacking, kidnapping ladies and hitting. War must come to peace in crooked ways.

Plot must be well-known for *Dāçarūpa* form *Dimam*. There may be all four *Sandhis* except *Vimarsanam*.

Hero should be a famous person in society and there may be sixteen heroes in this *Rūpa*. All *rasas* should be portrayed except *Sringara* and *Hasya*. There must be four *Ankām* and its literature must be *Rasadeeptha* and must contain all *bhavas*. Thunder, lightning, solar and lunar eclipses, war, attack, etc must be portrayed in this *Rūpa*. *Magic* and witchcraft must be there in this form. Lots of wooden dolls may also be utilised. Gods, serpents, demons, ghosts must be there in this form.

In *Vyayoga*, hero must be a well-known man in society but he should not be a divine personality. There are only very few lady characters in *Vyayoga*. There must be only one *Ankām*. The story is limited to one day. There may be all other *Sandhis* except *Garbha* and *Vimarsana*. Lots of conflicts among men must be there like that of *Samavakāra*. War, duel and conflict must be there in this form.

Ankām has its plots well-known. There are only *Mukha* and *Nirvaṇa Sandhis* in coming *Rūpas*. Characters should not be divine ones, but human beings. This *Rūpa* focuses on *Karuna* (pity) *rasa*. There may be characters, who are receding from war and hitting hard at their enemies. There may be a lot of lamenting by women. This *Rūpa* may be a combination of disinterested words and worried gestures.

Prahasanam can be divided into *Sudhaprahasanam* and *Sankeernaprahasanam*. In *Sudhaprahasanam*, there may be humorous conversations to an ascetic or Brahmin by *Nikrishta* characters (characters of lower birth). There may be heaps of humorous or sarcastic remarks. There should be a strict plot. In *Sankeernaprahasanam*, there must be eunuchs, prostitutes and spendthrifts. Costumes and gestures should be evident. Practical aspects of the world and crooked activities must feature in the plot.

Bhāṇa expresses the experiences of self and descriptions of others. This one act *Rūpa* depends on different subjects. One person should enact the parts of all characters. This is like answering another's questions. This *Rūpa* is in question-answer form.

Vīthī has only one *Ankām* and one or two characters. This can portray all *rasas* and *lakshanas*. This must have thirteen different aspects and *rasa bhāva* in correlation with the peculiarities of characters.

Another important aspect of Sanskrit *Natya* theory is the theory of *Rasa*. S.S.Barlingay examines the origin and relevance of this concept:

The word *rasa* was borrowed, as is stated, by Bharata from *Atharvaveda* for explaining the theory of stage- drama, He states this in the seventeenth verse of the

first chapter of *Natyasastra*..*rasan atharvanad api* (poetic embellishments) like Bhamaha. Rhetoricians belonging to the school of *alamkara* like Bhamaha, Dandin and Vamana use it for explaining the nature of poetry. The word *rasa* is also used in the sense of sound or noise as also for taste. Its etimology is traced to the root, *ras+* (*ghan*). (87-88)

Every dramatic presentation is aimed at evoking in the minds of the audience a particular kind of aesthetic experience, i.e., *Rasa*. *Rasa* can be explained as “aesthetic relish.” Bharata says that *Natya* is the imitation of life (*Lokanukruti*) wherein the various human emotions have to be dramatically glorified (*Bhavanukirtanam*) so that the spectator is able to flavor the portrayed pleasure and pain (*Lokasya sukhaduhkha*) as *Natyarasa*. This *Rasa* experience will entertain and enlighten the spectator who hence becomes the *Rasika*.

The word, *Rasa*, means *Rasyate Anena iti rasāh* in Sanskrit, i.e., *rasa* is generated from the act of being propitiated. The extract of a fruit is referred to as *rasa* which itself is the essence of it, the ultimate flavour of it. Bharata succinctly encapsulates the theory of *Rasa* in his most famous formula-like *Rasa sutra* thus: *Vibhava anubhava vyabhicharisamyogat rasanishpattih* (Pushpendra Kumar 187). Priyadarshi Patnaik observes:

According to Bharata, it is from a combination of *bhavas* that *rasa* arises. *Bhavas* can be roughly translated as psycho- physiological states in a man and they are broadly of three kinds- *sthayibhavas*, *vyabhicharibhavas* and *sattvikabhavas*. *Sthayibhavas* which can be translated broadly as stable and permanent states, are those which dominate or persist throughout a work. (7)

The aesthetic relish is produced (*rasanishpattih*) by a combination of the determinants (*vibhava*), consequents (*anubhava*), and transitory states or fleeting emotions (*vyabhicharibhava*). It is explained that *Rasa* is the essence derived from the various ingredients. He gives the parallel of the extract, *rasa*, got from various condiments, having different tastes, when combined becomes delectable to taste. Hence, that which can be tasted or flavoured (*asvadya*) can be termed as *Rasa*. Just as the gourmet with a refined taste relishes good food, so also cultured and learned persons taste and relish the well-established dominant mood (*sthayibhava*) created by various *bhavas* and *abhinaya*. This aesthetic relish, which is possible only through mental perception, is termed as *natyarasa*. Even the terms *vibhava*, *anubhava*, and *vyabhicharibhava* refer to stage representations. It naturally follows that what they produce should only be *natya rasa* (sentiments pertaining to the dramatic spectacle). One enjoys experiencing the emotions with the artistes, and sometimes even visibly expresses it by shedding tears or

laughing spontaneously. But both the artiste and the spectator are well aware that neither of them is going through it in reality. This enjoyment is *Natyarasa*. S.N.Dasgupta exemplifies the enjoyment of spectator in this way:

In the subconscious and unconscious regions, there are always lying dormant various types of emotion-motive complexes. When through artistic creation a purely universal emotional fear, amour etc. are projected in the mind they become affiliated to those types of emotion-motive complexes and this mutual affiliation or apperception or implicit recognition of identity immediately transforms the presented artistic universal into artistic joy or *Rasa*. It is for this reason that in experiencing artistic joy there is a kinship and identity among all art enjoyers. (194)

The 6th and 7th chapters of the *Nāṭyaṣāstra*, known as the *Rasadhyaya* and *Bhavaadhyaya* respectively, together bring out the concept of the *Bhava-Rasa* theory of Bharata, and have hence become the bedrock for all deliberations on aesthetics, including the most brilliant contribution of Abhinavaguptacharya, whose *Abhinavabharati* remains till date the best commentary on the *Nāṭyaṣāstra*. *Bhava* is derived from the root *bhu-bhavati*, that is, “to become,” “to come into existence.” Bharata gives a causal quality to *Bhava*, saying *bhavayanti iti bhava* (Pushpendra Kumar ChVII 1), that is, a thing or mental state that brings its awareness or makes one conscious of it, which pervades one like a particular smell.

Bharata classifies the *Rasa* under eight categories (*Ashtarasa*) and gives the corresponding *Bhava* which gives rise to the *rasa*. These are known as *Sthayi bhava* or pervading stable emotion. They are *Rati* (love), *Hasa* (mirth), *Shoka* (grief), *Krodha* (anger), *Utsaha* (heroism), *Bhaya* (fear), *Jugupsa* (disgust), and *Vismaya* (wonder) (Pushpendra Kumar chVI 17). The corresponding eight *Rasas* are *Sringara* (amorous), *Hasya* (humorous), *Karuna* (pathetic), *Raudra* (furious), *Vira* (valorous), *Bhayanaka* (horrific), *Bibhatsa* (repugnant), and *Adbhuta* (wondrous). (15) There are three types of *Bhava*, namely, *Sthayi* (eight types), *Vyabhichari* (thirty three), and *Satvika* (eight), totaling to forty nine. The *Satvika bhava* is the physical manifestation of intense emotion. They are *Sthamba* (petrification), *Sveda* (perspiration), *Romancha* (horripilation), *Svarabheda* (voice change), *Vepathu* (trembling), *Vaivarnya* (facial colour change), *Asru* (weeping), and *Pralaya* (fainting) (15). *Vibhava* is the cause (*Karana*), the main stimulating cause being termed as *Alambana vibhava* (the determinant), and, the environmental factors that are additional causes termed as

Uddipana vibhava (excitant). *Anubhava* is the consequent physical reaction through action, word and facial expression that follows (*anu*), as the impact of the *vibhava*. The thirty three *Vyabhichari bhavas* (also referred to as *Sanchari bhavas* in some editions), are transitory, fleeting emotions based on psychological states of the mind. Several such emotions follow one after the other, one replacing the other, strengthening the *Sthayi bhava* at each stage, till finally the *Sthayibhava* is established and there is *Rasanubhava*. “Just as in music a procession of notes in certain combinations reveals a characteristic melodic whole or *raga*, similarly it seems that the representation of *bhavas* reveals *rasa* as an aesthetic whole” (Pande 313).

For instance, in the play *Abhijnānashākuntalam*, Kalidasa uses King Dushyanta's coming to the hermitage to pay respects to the sage, as the *Alambana vibhāva*. The girls' talk, the bee, their attire, the flower garden and such others become the *Uddipana vibhāva*. On Dushyanta's entry, fleeting emotions like confusion, wonder, fear, curiosity, bashfulness and such others seem to fill the minds of all the characters present. The blossoming of love between Shakuntala and Dushyanta is gradually established through the reactions of both of them to the conversation of the Sakhis with the King. If the “patra” enacting as Shakuntala is able to show the *satvikabhava* of *romancho* (horripilation) or *vepathu* (trembling) out of the new experience of love which is strange to an ashramite and Dushyanta is able to portray *sthambha* (petrification) on seeing her beauty and *romancho* on knowing her lineage, then the *rati sthayi bhava* gets established in the mind of the people who can experience the *sringara rasa*.

Bharata says that *Bhava* and *Rasa* are mutually dependent. The performer or producer, be it an actor, dancer, singer, instrumentalist, or stage craftsmen, should be conscious of the *sthayi bhava* and the *rasa* that they are striving to establish. This will help them realise their *Siddhi* through *Rasotpatti*. Prof. B. M. Chaturvedi explains the mode of enjoying *rasa*:

Later on, *Nāṭyaṣāstra* itself explains how the *rasa* is relished. Men eat different types of condiments, relish different tastes and get pleasure. In the same manner, spectators relish the *sthayibhavas* suggested through the presentation of the *bhavas* and the *Natya* and get pleasure. This is the reason why they are called *Rasa* in the *Natya*. It is clear from this that *Sringara*, etc. are given the name *Rasa* because they are relished in a *Kavya*. (41)

Later there were efforts to co-ordinate all the *rasa* to bring in a new *rasa*. On the other hands, there were also interesting attempts to synthesize all *rasas* into a single *rasa*. Mohan Thampi explains this in his essay “*Rasa as Aesthetic Experience*”:

Thus, with the contribution of detailed analysis of various aspects of plays, this book provides even minute observations on the ways of enjoying ‘rasa’, i.e., the ways of enjoying a play. This book *Nāṭyaṣāstra* is a great contribution of Indian indigenous knowledge system. It was taken as a model for the development of Western theatre. Indian Theatre has its origin in this wonderful book. This kind of a magnum opus is not there in world literature. Hence it is a unique one. All Indians can be proud as they are born in the land of *Nāṭyaṣāstra*. It is a great example of indigenous knowledge system and a definitely a model for modern theatre performances.

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